Protecting Firefighters' Health

A guide to help you stay healthy and reduce your cancer risk

Created by Kaiser Permanente in collaboration with California Professional Firefighters and firefighters.



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- This guidance should not be considered medical advice.
- Coverage of services may vary from plan to plan. Check your plan documents or ask your benefits coordinator.

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Be proactive to reduce your risk

Practical steps to reduce your risk of cancer and other chronic diseases

Here's what you can do:

Protect yourself on the job

- Use proper personal protective equipment (PPE) and safety practices.
- Log exposures so there's a record over time (e.g., using CPF's Personal Exposure Reporting tool).
- Stay up to date with your annual occupational physicals.

Resources:

- Talk to your department about safety protocols.
- Visit https://peronline.org/ for more information.

Included in this guide:

1. Know your body

- Learn about **possible cancer symptoms.**
- **Track symptoms** over time.
- See a doctor if symptoms **last more than a few weeks** or **keep coming back.**

Spot and monitor potential cancer symptoms

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2. See your primary care doctor regularly

- **Schedule routine wellness visits** to stay up to date on recommended cancer and preventive screenings.
- **Discuss new or acute health issues, or symptoms** that concern you.

Make the most of your wellness visit

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3. Amplify healthy behaviors

- **Incorporate everyday behaviors** that lower risk of disease.

Reduce cancer risk with lifestyle choices

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"I always go to my employer-provided physical, so why is it important to go to my personal doctor? What's the difference?"

Employer-Provided Occupational Health	Primary Care
Employer + job-specific medical care • Provides job-specific medical care and care of work-related injuries. • Occupational health exams are important for your and your crew's safety.	**Individualized medical care** • Helps you prevent illness and manage chronic conditions • Protects your long-term health and quality of life
✓ **Learn about and use the health benefits provided by your employer.**	✓ **See your PCP regularly:** • Wellness visits • New or concerning symptoms • Follow-ups after occupational exams Building an ongoing relationship with your personal doctor helps establish trust, ensures they understand your health history, and supports better preventive care and tailored guidance. Regular visits can also help track health changes over time that could indicate cancer or other chronic conditions.

Both are important for your long-term health.

Cancer Screening & Diagnostic Testing

Firefighters and doctors share the same goal: Catch cancer early to help people live longer and healthier lives.

Two scenarios for testing:

1

Routine screening is recommended for people without symptoms:

- Based on age, sex, and risk factors
- By national medical experts
- For colorectal, breast, cervical, lung, and prostate cancers

2

When something feels off

If you have symptoms or concerning changes, the doctor will try to determine the cause – cancer or other illness – regardless of age. This may include diagnostic testing.

Your doctor helps weigh the potential benefits and risks:

- What the test can and can't show
- How accurate it is for someone with your risk profile
- Whether results are likely to change your care
- Possible false positive that may lead to additional testing, out-of-pocket costs, or emotional stress

Spot and monitor potential cancer symptoms

Why and how to track possible cancer symptoms

Why it matters

Firefighters are used to pushing through discomfort, sleep disruption, and strain.

Because many firefighters appear healthy and fit, symptoms can be easy for both firefighters and doctors to overlook.

Many symptoms are caused by common conditions. The list on the next page is **not for self-diagnosis** – it's a reminder to check for and document ongoing changes.

How to use this tool

1. Reference the list of possible cancer symptoms.
2. Use prompts below to document your symptoms, including dates. If symptoms last longer than a few weeks or recur, contact your doctor.
3. Use your notes to help describe your symptoms.

Track symptoms that:

- Are new or different from your normal
- Don't go away or come back

Document:

- What changed: what feels different from your normal
- When & how often: when it started and how often it happens
- What affects it: anything that makes it better or worse
- Impact: how noticeable or worrying it feels (1–5)

How this helps at a doctor visit:

- Gives you clear examples and dates to share so that you can be specific about what "feels off"

Ask your doctor:

"Based on my normal, what changes would make this more concerning?"

Tips

Appointments

If your symptoms feel urgent or concerning, many health systems offer advice lines where you can get guidance and help finding an earlier appointment.

Use your computer or smartphone to document:

- Try a calendar, notes or voice recording app.
- Set reminders to check in on your symptoms.
- Example: If you have a symptom now, set a reminder in 3 weeks.

Spot and monitor potential cancer symptoms

Symptoms to track - See previous page for how to use this information

Unusual lumps, swelling, or thickening

- New or growing lumps in the neck, armpits, groin, chest, or testicles
- Swelling that doesn't go down after a few weeks
- Areas that feel firmer than surrounding areas

Lumps are often blamed on muscle strain, gear pressure, or minor injuries – but lumps that persist or grow deserve a check.

Moles and other skin changes

- New spots or changes in size, shape, or color
- Dark, red, or scaly patches; areas that bruise easily
- Sores that don't heal (face, neck, hands, scalp)
- Ongoing itching, burning, or thickening

Fire exposure and PPE friction can mask skin changes – persistent or evolving spots matter

Unexplained fatigue or night sweats

- Feeling unusually exhausted despite rest days
- Needing more recovery time than usual
- that interferes with workouts, calls, or daily tasks
- Fevers or chills without a clear reason
- Night sweats that are new, frequent, or drench sheets/clothes

Don't ignore fatigue that feels different than expected. Fevers or night sweats that keep happening off-shift or without infection deserve a check.

Pain that doesn't improve

- Ongoing pain not tied to a specific injury
- Pain that worsens over time or wakes you at night

Aches are part of the job – but pain that doesn't respond to rest, rehab, or time is different.

Persistent cough, hoarseness, or breathing changes

- Cough or hoarseness that lasts weeks
- Shortness of breath that's new or worsening

Smoke exposure and seasonal illness are common – symptoms that don't resolve or keep returning matter.

Changes in bowel or bladder habits

- Blood in stool
- Ongoing constipation or diarrhea
- Changes in stool shape, consistency, or color
- Changes in urine color
- Increased urgency or difficulty urinating

Hydration and schedules affect digestion, but persistent changes aren't just a shift issue.

Unusual bleeding or bruising

- Frequent or unexplained bruises
- Bleeding gums or blood in urine/stool

Minor injuries are common – but bruising or bleeding without clear trauma that keeps happening should be checked.

Unexplained weight loss or appetite changes

- Losing weight without trying
- Feeling full quickly or losing interest in food
- Ongoing nausea or appetite changes

Busy shifts and missed meals happen – but continued weight loss or appetite changes off-shift should be checked.

Vision changes

- Blurred or double vision
- New trouble focusing, reading, or seeing at night
- Vision loss in any part of the visual field
- Flashes, floaters, or shadowed vision
- Persistent eye pain or pressure

Smoke and eye irritation are common – symptoms that persist off-shift or keep recurring should be checked.

Make the most of your wellness visit

What to Expect at a Primary Care Wellness/Preventive Visit

Wellness visits focus on your **long-term health over time**, including cancer prevention, heart health, and tracking changes before they become problems.

Wellness visit topics

1. Health goals and concerns
2. Personal and family health history
3. Preventive screenings based on age, sex, and risk factors *
4. Lifestyle factors: sleep, nutrition, physical activity, tobacco, alcohol
5. Immunizations: Vaccines, including Hepatitis B and HPV, offer protection against infectious diseases and some cancers.
6. What to watch + when to follow up

What you should leave with

- Your concerns heard
- Clear next steps
- Follow-up plan

Bottom line

Regular preventive care helps you build a long-term relationship with a doctor who knows your baseline and can help you notice and track health changes over time.

* Your personal doctor may not be familiar with firefighter-specific screenings that might be offered through your employer or occupational health.

Make the most of your wellness visit

Wellness Visit Tips

Scheduling tips

1. **Find a doctor you trust:** Look for one who listens, explains their reasoning, and partners with you on next steps. Your crew can be a good source of recommendations.
2. **Plan ahead.** Wellness visits can book out weeks or months in advance.
3. **Book now.** If you have to miss it, reschedule.
4. **Schedule a separate visit for new or ongoing symptoms,** so your care team can give those concerns the time they need.

Prepare for your visit by writing down:

- Family history of cancer, heart disease, or other chronic conditions (see next page)
- What is most important for you discuss
- Questions you have (e.g., based on recent bloodwork)

Communication tips

Be clear about who you are and the demands of your job:

- "I'm a firefighter, and my job exposes me to smoke, chemicals, and other carcinogens."
- "My work is physically intense and high stress."
- "I often have disrupted sleep because of shift work and calls."
- "I understand my job demands can raise my risk for cancer and heart disease."

State your concerns and goals:

- "I want my job-related risks considered in my care."
- "I'm trying to stay healthy long-term so I can keep working and enjoy my retirement."

If you want more clarity:

- "Can you help me understand your thinking?"
- "When should I check back in?"
- "Based on today's visit, what should we keep an eye on?"

Make the most of your wellness visit

Discussion tool: Risk factors

How to use this tool

1. Before your visit, review this list and research your family history, especially cancer history – although most cancers are not inherited, some have a strong genetic component.
2. Note anything you want to discuss and be prepared to discuss at your visit.

Important note

This isn't a complete list or a diagnostic tool. Sharing this information helps your doctor understand your baseline and risk over time – even if no action is needed today.

Knowledge of family and genetic risk

- How complete is your knowledge about your family health history? (Good / Partial / Incomplete)

Cancer: General

- First-degree relative with cancer
- Cancer diagnosed before age 50 in family
- Multiple related cancers in family
- Known genetic mutation in family

Cardiovascular disease

- Heart disease, heart attack, or stroke in a parent or sibling
- Happened at a younger age
- High blood pressure, cholesterol, or diabetes in family

Colon cancer

- Family history of colon cancer
- History of inflammatory bowel disease (Crohn's/ulcerative colitis)
- History or family history of colon polyps

Breast cancer

- Family history of breast cancer (men & women)
- Known gene mutation

Prostate cancer (for men)

- First-degree relative with prostate cancer

Bladder cancer

- Occupational exposure as a firefighter
- Exposure to chemical fumes (dyes, rubber, leather, paint)

Lung, oral, and related cancers

- Smoking and tobacco use

Print and share with your doctor

Considerations for clinicians caring for firefighters

For clinicians: Caring for firefighters

How firefighters can use this tool
Share this page with your doctor.

Find this page, the full guide and more
bit.ly/kaiser-collaboration

Clinical approaches to supporting firefighters may include:

- Eliciting and validating patient concerns
- Encouraging discussion of symptoms, patterns over time, and occupational exposures
- Clearly explaining both the benefits and risks of screening

High levels of fitness may mask early signs of disease

- Many firefighters maintain strength, endurance, and cardiovascular fitness well into midlife.
- This visible fitness can obscure early disease signals.

Traditional clinical cues may be subtler or delayed

- Symptoms are often attributed to training, shift work, or job-related rather than illness.
- Early warning signs may not fit typical expectations.

Clinical assessment may need a different lens

- Greater attention to changes from an individual's baseline
- Consideration of occupational exposures
- Tracking symptom patterns over time

Firefighter occupational exposures

- Repeated smoke exposure
- Extended exposure to wildland fires
- Chemical or industrial fires
- Significant sun exposure
- Shift work & chronic sleep disruption
- Diesel exhaust: fumes and particulates
- Elevated levels of stress

Firefighter health risks

- Elevated cancer incidence and mortality
- Higher rates of cardiovascular disease
- Increased risk of respiratory conditions
- Mental health concerns including chronic stress, repeated trauma exposure, alcohol and substance use, depression and suicidal ideation

For more information: First Responder Center for Excellence Guides
firstrespondercenter.org/resource-hub/firefighter-physicals/

Sources

1. International Agency for Research on Cancer (IARC). Occupational exposure as a firefighter. IARC Monographs, 2023. https://publications.iarc.who.int/download/Volume132.pdf.
2. Jahnke S, et al. Firefighter cancer incidence and mortality: An updated meta-analysis. Asian Pac J Cancer Prev. 2024. https://doi.org/10.31557/APJCP.2024.25.3.801.

Reduce cancer risk with lifestyle choices

Quick tips and resources

These habits help reduce cancer risk and support heart, sleep, and overall health.

Habits & how they affect risk	Tips & resources
Sleep Control what you can, even when you can't control the calls Sleep is when your body repairs damage, regulate hormones, and controls inflammation.	**Sleep basics for firefighters:** • Dark, cool, quiet sleep space (curtains, eye mask, earplugs, white noise) • Short wind-down routine (10–15 min): dim lights, stretch, slow breathing • Use caffeine early, not late; avoid within ~6 hours of sleep • Avoid using alcohol for sleep – it worsens sleep quality and increases cancer risk • Nap smart: 20–30 min for alertness, 90 min if truly sleep-deprived • If sleep doesn't leave you feeling rested, check with your doctor Sleep and Cancer Prevention **tinyurl.com/ffsleepcancer**
Food Protect your heart & lower cancer risk Healthier eating choices can help lower inflammation, support healthy weight, and protect long-term health.	**Simple eating shifts that help:** • Add one fruit or vegetable to meals you already eat • Choose whole grains & fiber-rich foods (oats, beans, lentils) • Use healthy fats (olive oil, nuts, fish 1–2x/week) • Limit processed foods, excess sodium, sugar, and processed/red meats • Keep healthy snacks available and convenient Anti-Inflammatory Nutrition and Cancer **tinyurl.com/ffnutritioncancer**
Tobacco & nicotine Reduce or quit Firefighting already strains the heart and lungs. Tobacco, vapes, chew, and nicotine pouches add more strain.	**Practical steps that help:** • Start by cutting back (delay first use, nicotine-free windows) • Avoid nicotine right after calls or workouts • Drink less alcohol – nicotine + alcohol together is harder on recovery • Choose FDA-approved nicotine replacement (patch, gum, lozenge) over smoking, vaping, chew, or pouches Kick It California — science-based quit support **kickitca.org**
Healthy habits Amplify healthy habits to reduce disease risk Lifestyle habits may seem small but can improve your overall health	**Quick tips:** • Physical activity: stay consistent, not extreme • Stress management: mindfulness, outdoor time, crew & family connection • Connectedness: accountability partners (spouses, family, fellow firefighters) • Avoid risky substances: tobacco, nicotine, excess alcohol • Focus on progress, not perfection. Small, repeatable changes add up. CPF podcast **youtube.com/watch?v=pTFIkeMrIgM** Firefighter Cancer Support Network **firefightercancersupport.org/ffcam**

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